Native Americans and whites transformed violent treaty conflicts into a powerful environmental movement in Wisconsin.

From Enemies to Allies

BY ZOLTAN GROSSMAN AND DEBRA MCNUTT

PHOTO BY ZOLTAN GROSSMAN

Natives marched in Keshena, Wisconsin to protect the Wolf River from Exxon's Mining Company.

The late 1980s and early 1990s was a time of intense conflict between Ojibwe (Chippewa) Indians and white sportfishers over Native treaty rights in the forested northern third of Wisconsin. For months, the normal peace and quiet of this ceded area outside of the state's six Ojibwe reservations was shattered by whites chanting racist taunts such as "timber n_____," assaulting tribal elders, and ramming Ojibwe vehicles to protest the ancient practice of Native spearfishing.

Less than a decade later, Native American nations and white sportfishing groups are cooperating to protect the same fish they had fought over, and building a powerful alliance that has chased several mining companies out of the state. International mining industry journals now express worry about the contagious spread of Wisconsin anti-mining strategies, and identify Wisconsin as one of four global battlegrounds for the industry's future.

While some activists downplay racial differences in order to build short-term cooperation between different groups, the Wisconsin experience shows that such a strategy is counterproductive. The Native nations that asserted their rights most strongly also developed the strongest cooperation with neighboring non-Indian communities around issues of mutual concern, and against outside corporate threats. The Wisconsin experience demonstrates that racial politics do not con-

PHOTO BY CATE GILLES

To protest mining corporations in Wisconsin, Native Americans led a march from the Mole Reservation to the proposed Crandon mine site.

tradict anti-corporate politics. In fact, the assertion of rights by particular oppressed groups can help build and strengthen multiracial alliances.

Treaty Conflicts

Under the treaties of 1837 and 1842, the Ojibwe had reserved rights to use natural resources—such as fish, game, wild rice, and medicinal plants—in the "ceded territories" they sold to the U.S. The tribe's historic practice of spearfishing was outlawed in 1908, driving the tradition underground, until a 1983 federal court decision recognized that Wisconsin Ojibwe had retained treaty rights in the ceded territories.

In response, a backlash gained steam among white sportsmen who feared that spearfishing would deplete the lakes of fish. Although the Ojibwe never speared more than three percent of northern Wisconsin fish, they were repeatedly scapegoated by the media and sportfishers for the region's environmental and economic problems.

Indain speafishers were confronted by mobs of white anti-treaty protesters held signs reading "Save a Walleye—Spear an Indian." They shouted racist epithets such as "timber n_ _ _ _ _," "welfare warriors," and "spearchuckers," and threw rocks, bottles, and full beer cans at Natives. Ojibwe saw their elders assaulted and nearly run over, their drum groups harassed with whistles and mock chants. White sportfishers blockaded, swamped, and attacked Ojibwe boats with metal ball bearings, pipe bombs, and sniper fire.

The state deployed National Guard helicopters, Department of Natural Resources (DNR) patrol boats, and riot-ready police from nearly every county at boat landings during the two-week spring spearfishing seasons. But they actually did precious little to stop the violence, which centered around the Lac du Flambeau and Mole Lake Reservations.

In response, the Midwest Treaty Network (MTN), founded in 1989 as an alliance of Native and non-Native groups supporting tribal sovereignty, initiated the Witness for Nonviolence, modeled after similar monitoring programs in Central America. During the treaty conflicts, about 2,000 trained witnesses stood with Ojibwe fishing families as a supportive presence, documenting anti-Indian violence and harassment, and trying to deter or lessen the violence and promote reconciliation.

Witnesses noticed that many followers of the anti-treaty groups were confused by anti-Indian propaganda, and genuinely concerned about the environmental effects of spearing. Even at the height of the spearing clashes, the late Red Cliff Ojibwe activist Walter Bresette had predicted that white northerners would realize that environmental and economic problems are "more of a threat to their lifestyle than Indians who go out and spear fish....We have more in common with the anti-Indian people than we do with the state of Wisconsin." How to turn this potential into a reality was the question.

Mining Invasion

The opportunity came with the 1990s invasion of mining companies into the area. The environmental threat they posed provided a crucial common enemy around which to build an alliance. A number of multinational mining companies, such as Exxon and Kennecott, had long eyed the metallic sulfide deposits in northern Wisconsin. They saw the administration of pro-mining Republican Governor Tommy Thompson as the ideal opportunity to propose new mines, particularly since Native and non-Native communities were split over treaty rights.

White sportfishers attacked Ojibwe boats with metal ball bearings, pipe bombs, and sniper fire.

Ironically, it was Native sovereign rights guaranteed by treaties that became a key factor in building a multiracial alliance against the mining companies in Ojibwe ceded territory. The treaties gave the tribes legal standing in federal court to challenge environmental degradation. This political clout forced whites who were seriously interested in environmental protection to sit down at the table with the Native nations as potential allies.

This budding alliance first appeared when local white environmentalists and the Lac du Flambeau Ojibwe Nation jointly opposed Noranda Corporation's proposed Lynne mine

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near the Willow Flowage in Oneida County. The area had been the scene of some of the most intense spearing clashes, but an alliance against the mine nevertheless developed quickly. As a result, the company was forced to withdraw in 1993.

Teacher and environmental leader Carolyn Parker asserted that the spearfishing conflict "closed some people's minds but opened others," including some sportsmen who had been anti-treaty group followers. As anti-treaty groups revealed their racist agenda, most of their "environmental" following fell away, especially when they refused to oppose new mining plans that threatened the fishery. Lac du Flambeau spearfishing coordinator Tom Maulson, who was later elected tribal chairman, said that the spearing conflict offered an "education on everybody's part as to what Indians were about. It needed a conflict to wake them up."

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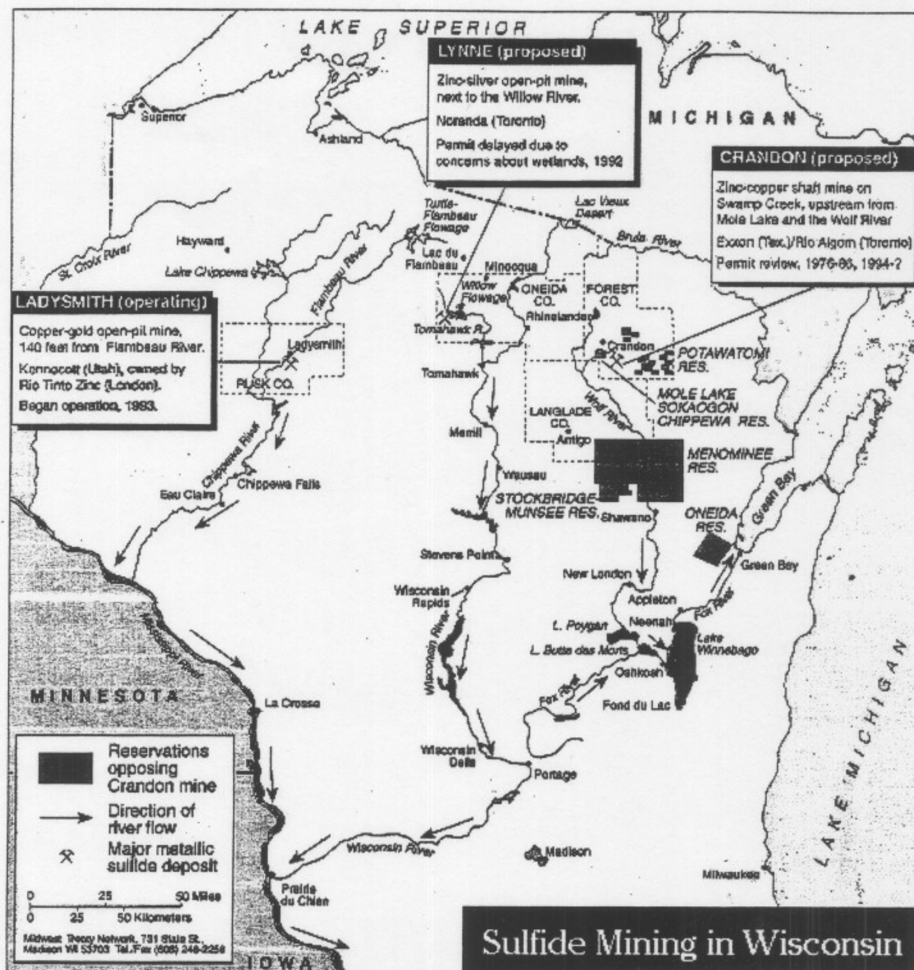
But the key struggle broke out when Exxon attempted to mine the large Crandon metallic sulfide deposit in Forest County with backing from Governor Thompson. The Crandon mine site is one mile upstream from the ancient wild rice beds of the Mole Lake Ojibwe Reservation, five miles upstream from the pristine trout-rich Wolf River (which flows through the Menominee Nation), and five miles downwind from a Potawatomi Reservation.



Sulfide Mining in Wisconsin

In 1995, the MTN initiated the Wolf Watershed Educational Project (WWEP) campaign, which quickly mushroomed into a grassroots alliance of Native, environmental, and sportfishing groups against the Crandon mine. The campaign organized a speaking tour to 22 river communities, and a rally of 1,000, unprecedented in the region. In 1997, the WWEP toured the state to increase support for a Mining Moratorium bill, which Exxon unsuccessfully tried to defeat with a $2 million blitz of TV ads and lobbying. (The bill passed but has since been undermined by the state DNR.) A 2000 WWEP tour visited schools around the state, culminating in a rally at the capitol in Madison and passage of a bill to ban cyanide in mining.

Building Bridges

The WWEP tours brought many non-Indians into contact with Natives for the first time. Communication between the two communities was often facilitated by individuals whose family or personal history brought them into contact with the other group, particularly rural white teachers, shopkeepers, and nurses. In the wake of the previous conflicts, key players felt motivated to sit down at the table and to educate each other about common concerns. The groups came to view this alliance-building process as a welcome diversion from continued racial strife; it became a conscious goal of many participants. Retired white engineer George Rock observed, "Things we've gained from knowing who people are will not go away....When you work with people, you don't just work on the issue...the passing of the pipe becomes part of the understanding."

By initiating positive relations between former enemies, the WWEP and other Wisconsin anti-mining campaigns created a major headache for the mining companies. In 1998 Exxon sold the Crandon project to its Canadian partner Rio Algom, which was bought out by the London-based South African firm

Billiton in 2000. While Billiton is still trying to revive the Crandon mining operation, international mining journals now describe the WWEP as "one example of what is becoming a very real threat to the global mining industry."

Unity Out of Conflict

How has such a grassroots movement managed to slow down the corporate Goliath? Part of the answer lies in Native nations' perseverance in defending their sovereignty and treaty rights. Another part of the answer lies in Wisconsin's history of environmental ethics, and its tradition of populist and progressive politics. Part of the answer also lies in a regional rebellion by rural northern Wisconsin, which has been historically poorer and more neglected than the southern part of the state.

The alliance was built on a sense of commonality cemented by environmentalism. Environmental protection not only served as a unifying concept, but helped build cultural understanding that extended beyond the issue that initially brought unity.

This environmental unity was deepened by a common sense of place. The geographic setting, and the landscape's hold on the imaginations of tribes and their neighbors, unified the alliance. Langlade County sportfisher Bob Schmitz says that a "mutual love of the river" brought together angling groups and tribal members. Groups bonded in defense of places that both perceive as "sacred"—such as the Willow Flowage or the Wolf River—even though they perceive this "sacredness" in very different ways and use natural resources for very different purposes.

Most political strategists seek to avoid or lessen differences between different communities. But in areas such as Lac du Flambeau and Mole Lake, the strong Native assertion of sovereignty was key to forging the alliance.

The alliance allowed both sides to use Native sovereignty and stewardship to the advantage of the whole community. Tribal representatives described treaties as posing a stronger legal obstacle to mining than weakened state laws, and sportfishers suggested that the Ojibwe had done a better job than the DNR in monitoring the fishery. In 1995, the Mole Lake Ojibwe and Potawatomi used federal laws to strengthen their reservation environmental regulations, to protect the air and water for Indians and non-Indians alike.

When voters in the township of Nashville (covering half the Crandon mine site) ousted their pro-mining town board in a 1997 election, they elected a Mole Lake Ojibwe to fill one of the three board seats. The new board not only went to court to try to stop the mine, but instituted a joint economic development program with the tribe and approved the expansion of the tribal land base.

In addition, some Native nations used their sovereignty rights to open large casinos in the mid-1990s, generating income that strengthened their ability to fight mining companies in the courts and in the arena of public opinion, despite threats by Governor Thompson to close the casinos if the tribes did not back down from their treaty rights and environmental demands. Even some former anti-treaty protesters were given jobs at the casinos.

In fact, absent the demonstrated power of treaty and sovereign rights, rural whites would have felt little reason to sit down at the table with the Indians. Facing an unequal relationship with their neighbors, Native residents likewise would have little incentive to unite with them. The demand for Native sovereign rights equalized Natives and non-Natives, and this equality was a prerequisite for building real unity. Al Gedicks, executive secretary of the Wisconsin Resources Protection Council, says Native treaty victories help solidify the "perception that we are now dealing with equals rather than with a community perceived as victims."

Ironically, the previous treaty conflicts served to define the land and its resources as something both rural communities needed to defend in order to preserve their resource-based ways of life. An outside threat from the mining companies helped to build a common territorial identity that included all groups that lived in the threatened local area, but a strong assertion of Native nationhood was necessary to get to that point.

In places where a treaty conflict was prevented or did not occur, the later Native/non-Native cooperation was not as fully developed, and environmental alliances may have failed as a result. For example, in Rusk County, next to the Flambeau River, Kennecott Corporation opened the Ladysmith mine after the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe ran out of funds to stop the mine in court. The tribe had not aggressively pursued off-reservation spearfishing in an attempt to build a relatively better relationship with non-Indians. Consequently, local whites may not have become aware of the treaties' legal powers and the copper-gold mine was able to operate successfully from 1993 to 1997.

Al Gedicks says that rural whites would be more likely to work with tribes if the treaty issue was "in their face...they would have had to have an opinion, get educated."

A New Environmentalism

Resource corporations are used to dealing with environmental groups made up largely of white, urban, upper-middle-class 20-somethings, who protest projects supported by rural communities for the jobs they produce. The companies have been able to portray such activists as hippies and yuppies who do not care about rural people, and white urban environmentalists often reinforce the stereotype by not being inclusive or supportive of people besides themselves.

What corporations face in northern Wisconsin is something new—an environmental movement that is multiracial, rural-based, middle-class and working-class, and made up of many youth and retired elderly people. This movement does not just address the mining industry's environmental problems, but also its threats to Native cultures and the local tourism economy, its "boom-and-bust" social disruptions, and its mistreatment of union employees. Try as they might, the mining companies could not divide Wisconsin communities by region, by class, or by race. ◆

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